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DOES AMERICAN FARMING PAY?

BY THE HON. GEORGE B. LORING, EX-COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE.

THE assertion that there is no profit in American agriculture is so frequently and so positively made that it is almost universally accepted as true. Political economists, in discussing the sources of wealth, usually dismiss the great industry of agriculture as hardly coming within the range of their investigation. A purely agricultural section is apt to attract but little attention, as compared with the more active communities in which mechanical industries employ capital and stimulate faculties. And while human ingenuity is exhausting itself laying down the laws of commerce and establishing the methods of manufactures, the business of tilling the soil is allowed to pursue its quiet and unobtrusive way, guided by such light as can be drawn from practical experience. It cannot be said that the thoughtful students of social and civil affairs have a feeling of contempt for the business of farming, but it can be said that they are not inclined to consider it with the respect they feel for more attractive and demonstrative and imposing occupations. The attractions of estates all recognize ; the fancy farms of prosperous merchants and manufacturers, and the results of their management, are too often charged to the business of farming, which is conducted in large measure and small as an industry on which a community depends for its subsistence.

The profits of this industry are not to be estimated by the wasteful extravagance of business entered upon for the gratification of taste, or by the failures of the idle and incompetent. It is not every ship that makes a prosperous voyage ; it is not every mill that earns great dividends ; nor is it every farm that remunerates the owner and cultivator. These three great industries occupy mankind, however, and the question of profits belongs to

all alike, and the success of all depends on the wisdom and skill with which they are managed, and on a judicious observance of the industrial laws of each locality. The chief end of man on earth is to supply what is wanting—the products of foreign latitudes, the products of the mill, the products of the soil, the products of the mind, all to feed and clothe and cultivate the race in accordance with surrounding circumstances. In this work the farmer does his share, and reaps his reward ; and in America his opportunities vary as the soil and climate of the vast region stretching from the lakes to the gulf, and from the Atlantic to the Pacific, vary. The agriculture of America, therefore, has no universal characteristic. In that section where diversified industry prevails, and the land is cultivated to supply the local market, the accurate and careful work of the market-garden and the dairy has become a necessity, and profitable and valuable acres abound. In the remoter frontier regions, and in the newer States, on homesteads and newly-settled lands, the wholesale farming which supplies the staples, wheat and corn and beef and pork, to a general market, is the business to which the farmer must devote himself. In the cotton-growing States, while the social system has changed, and the old relations between labor and the land have been destroyed, the system of cotton-growing has remained the same, and the primitive methods have not been laid aside. On these three systems the agricultural industry of the United States has grown up from the simple employment which occupied three millions of colonists, and gave them all their subsistence and all their resources, to the varied toil of sixty millions of people, engaged in cultivating old lands and taking up new ones, and supplying the wants of markets near and remote with necessaries and luxuries, and in supporting all those public and private institutions which, of necessity, belong to a cultivated and independent and responsible people.

It is hardly reasonable to suppose that the various methods of managing the land and developing the resources of the country would have been adopted and pursued for generations, had they not furnished an ample reward to the land-owner and strength and vitality to the State. It was mixed farming which supported the colonies in peace and war, and it is mixed farming which has supported as an associate industry most of the older

States since the formation of the Union. Upon the wholesale agriculture of the West, that vast region of great farms has flourished and grown into an active, populous, and wealthy agricultural empire. During the plantation days of the South, great fortunes were drawn from the soil, sufficient to secure the luxury and culture which belong to the great centres of trade and manufacture. But for the supporting power of the soil, the existence of an independent land-holding people, compelled to sustain themselves, without governmental aid, and intolerant of the subordinate position which goes with classification, caste, and legitimacy, would have been impossible. The profits of American farming can be estimated by the work it has accomplished in all those years during which the country was struggling for an existence, and in all those later years during which the power of the Republic has increased in population, wealth, resources, and influence beyond any possible expectation and beyond any example existing or recorded. An industry whose product has increased in twenty years, from 1859 to 1879, from \$1,600,000,000 to \$3,600,000,000, must have had a great deal to do with the growing prosperity of the country, and must have been attended by great individual success.

It is only necessary to look back from the present decade to the last, to obtain the most gratifying evidence of the progress of this country in the work of tilling the soil. Starting in 1870, at which time the country had reached an enormous production in proportion to the population, and making comparisons with the returns of 1880, we may learn what can be accomplished in a single decade by a people constantly increasing in numbers and occupying new lands. In 1870, the wheat crop was 287,745,626 bushels—in 1880, it was 459,667,032 bushels; in 1870, the amount of cotton raised was 4,352,317 bales—in 1880, it was more than 6,000,000 bales; in 1870, the amount of Indian corn raised was 760,940,594 bushels—in 1880, the amount was 1,744,449,435 bushels; in 1870, the crop of oats reached 282,107,157 bushels—in 1880, it reached 407,859,033 bushels; in 1870, the tobacco crop amounted to 262,735,341 pounds—in 1880, it amounted to 473,107,573 pounds. The increase of agricultural products was nearly one hundred per cent. in these ten years, and in the last year of this decade the increase was in even greater ratio than this.

The law of this vast and growing industry is the cultivation of those crops which are adapted to a local market, and the oc-

cupation of land lying near that market. Not yet has this law become universal, it is true ; but it applies to all the older and thickly-settled sections of the country, and goes with diversified industries wherever they create large cities and towns. Fifty years ago the farmer was compelled to seek his market near home on account of the difficulty which attended the transportation of his crops. But the settling of new and remote lands, and the improved modes of transportation, rendered the growing of great staples possible and profitable, and corn, wheat, and provisions occupied the farmer's attention as he supplied remote and even foreign markets with his products. This frontier farming is but temporary, and must be followed by that systematic husbandry which constitutes the legitimate business of the American farmer, and carries him back to those days when agriculture was almost the sole business of the country, and when a prudent and industrious farming community was uniformly prosperous, even with the simplest management. While our large towns and our manufacturing cities provide markets for a large portion of the products of the West, they also support that more profitable system which consists in a careful cultivation of the soil and in the economical management of small farms. The trade and traffic which attend these systems of farming and this varied consumption are immense. New England requires about twenty million bushels of wheat, and produces only one million and a quarter. New York uses thirty millions, and grows about twelve. The supply of this deficiency comes from the West, from the Ohio Valley and the prairies west of the Mississippi and the Missouri, and costs from forty to fifty million dollars in years of good production—still more in years of comparative scarcity.

To assume, however, from the fact that New York goes west for six-tenths of her wheat supply, that wheat-growing is an unprofitable industry there would be an unsafe and unreliable conclusion. There are eight counties south of Lake Ontario which yielded, in 1879, six million eighty-six thousand eight hundred and seventy-six bushels on three hundred and seventy-seven thousand two hundred and sixty-nine acres, or eighteen and six-tenths bushels per acre,—a rate more than fifty per cent. above that of Minnesota or Dakota and somewhat higher than that of California for the same year. In other lines of agriculture also New York excels. In the district lying eastward towards the Hudson and southward

towards the Delaware, the dairy makes a production in butter and cheese worth far more than the grain procured from the West—a production not only supplying the home market, but also a large share of the hundred and forty millions of pounds of cheese exported. In the more populous sections of Dutchess and Westchester Counties and Long Island, the cultivation of market-gardens yields often, under favorable circumstances, a gross product worth a thousand dollars per acre; and in the neighborhood of New York city the product of market-gardening reaches millions of dollars. Ten years ago the census reported more than a million dollars' worth, and the present enumeration must, when tabulated, show an immense increase for this suburban district. The neighborhood of Boston and Philadelphia and every other large city is monopolized by market-gardens, and the country around Norfolk, Va., is mainly devoted to fruit and vegetables for northern consumption. The domestic fruits furnish a trade of large volume and value. New York city alone has a trade in this commodity of more than \$9,000,000; Chicago, which supplies the Northwest, has about as much, and the other large cities of the country would swell the amount to about \$60,000,000, including the large amount now sent from our Southern latitudes. Could all the fruits sold in small cities and villages be added, and those consumed on the farms be enumerated, it is probable, judging from careful deductions from available data, that the annual value of the fruits of the United States would not fall much below \$200,000,000.

Massachusetts, with her 2,000,000 of population, her 45,000 farms, and her 3,900,000 farm acres is also a good illustration of the type of American agriculture which increases year by year and which affords constant labor, and consequently good returns, to the farmer. In this State there are nearly 45,000 farms, in the management of which 78,000 persons are employed. The farms are small. In one of the most prosperous agricultural towns, containing 79 farms, 16 are less than 5 acres, 37 are less than 20 acres, and there is only one farm of over 90 acres. The aggregate value of the agricultural products of the State is \$47,756,033, of which dairy products, hay, straw, and fodder make up nearly \$24,000,000; the remainder of the list including fruits, meats, vegetables, animal products, poultry, wood products, and all articles of handiwork on the farm and in the farmer's family. This es-

timate gives to each person employed in farming about \$620 annually, out of which must come the expense of producing and selling the product—the total wages paid annually being \$6,390,-252. The business in which these persons is engaged is as various and diverse as the localities and the neighboring markets; and the result of their labors per acre will indicate the work in which they can profitably engage. The cereals yield about \$25 per acre; tobacco produces \$180; strawberries, \$200; onions, \$140; potatoes, \$55; cabbages, \$175. The total agricultural property of the State is valued at \$215,230,550. It may be interesting to know that in the associate industry, manufactures, the capital invested is \$303,806,185; the number of persons employed is 352,265; the product is \$631,135,284; the annual wages, \$128,315,362; the annual earning of each operative, \$364; the annual product of each operative, about \$1,800.

As an illustration of the growth and progress of a State almost purely agricultural, we may turn to the State of Iowa, which, 48 years ago, had only 43,112 inhabitants ; 43 years ago was admitted into the Union, and now has a population of nearly 2,000,000. In presenting his report this year to the Governor, John R. Schaffer, the Secretary of the State Agricultural Society, impressed with the value of the farming industry, says : “A review of the condition of agriculture for the year necessarily includes moral and educational and commercial influences.” He speaks for a State which has 185,351 farms, producing annually \$136,-103,473 ; a State which finds a market for a large proportion of its products beyond its own limits ; a State which has less than 7,000 manufacturing establishments, producing less than \$50,-000,000 annually ; a great, prosperous, agricultural State, the growth of less than half a century, the home of an industrious, thriving, well-educated people, of whom the Secretary also says : “There are progressive farmers who understand their business, are reducing it to a science, who avail themselves of every item of practical knowledge and who make it remunerative,”—a people the valuation of whose property amounts to \$398,671,251. The products of this State, as indicated by available returns, are the result of general farming. On 173,940 acres were raised 19,742,190 bushels of potatoes in 1888. Of the corn crop for the same year the Secretary says : “The acreage is 7,797,000, representing a total product of

321,629,962 bushels. The average price per bushel is twenty-three cents; commercial value of the crop, \$73,974,891. This is almost equal to the value of all the gold, silver, and lead mined in the United States in 1886, which was \$87,535,000. It is almost a larger sum than all the railroads in the United States paid in dividends on stock in that year. It is \$8,000,000 more than the total net earnings of all the National Banks in America and is considerable more than the total dividends paid by those banks in 1887. It represents 46,605,715 bushels more than were produced in the great crop year in Iowa in 1879, and in wealth to the State nearly \$13,000,000 more. It is 320,223,721 bushels more corn than was produced in the State in 1840."

When the wheat crop of Iowa failed, the farmers turned their attention to the dairy. They improved their cows largely by careful breeding and judicious feeding. On the first of January, 1887, they had 1,243,000 cows, valued at \$32,541,792, and they produced butter and cheese to the amount of \$277,477,429; milk, sold and condensed, amounting to \$200,000,000, and skimmed milk to \$50,417,054. The pasturage of the State is most luxuriant, and the valuation of the live-stock is \$180,110,016.

The yield of oats on 2,713,166 acres was 78,681,814 bushels, valued at \$15,342,953. The yield in 1840 was only 216,385 bushels.

The value of the grass crop in 1888 was \$33,446,275, and the amount of wheat grown on 2,101,000 acres was 19,314,000 bushels; the wheat crop in 1840 having been only 154,693 bushels.

The hog crop of Iowa in 1888 was the largest in the States, being 4,148,811.

This agricultural wealth of Iowa is divided among less than two millions of people. The farms of the State are in good condition. The taxes are readily paid. The churches are well supported. The institutions of learning are well endowed. In the homes of the people will be found great comfort and ample means of mental and moral culture. An air of substantial thrift pervades the State; and while it may be impossible to obtain the exact profit of every acre and every crop, or to ascertain the income of every land-holder, it is easy to see that a wide-spread prosperity pervades the community, whose characteristics are the repose and self-possession which attend success; and this is true not of Iowa alone, but of all the great agricultural States of the West and Northwest.

The value of farm lands will indicate the condition of the agriculture which enjoys the opportunity furnished by the industrial organization, especially occupying the larger portion of the United States. Land in the State of New York is valued at \$44.41 per acre; in New Jersey at \$65.16 per acre; in Vermont at \$36.40 per acre; in Wisconsin at \$23.30; in Massachusetts at \$50.27; in Ohio at \$45.97; in Illinois at \$31.87; in Maryland at \$32.33. Land, however, in the States where American enterprise is less developed, is valued at prices ranging from \$4.70 to \$10.89. It appears that farms command good prices and are in good demand where an enterprising and busy population is engaged in diversified industry and where a fertile soil yields a liberal crop; and they are in good demand because their cultivation is profitable. That there are unprofitable farms in many of the States is evident from the fact that they are abandoned by their owners. But it is a striking fact also that even where the number of farms diminishes, the agricultural products increase as the cultivation is transformed to more kindly acres. Farms well selected, well manned, well cultivated, are always profitable.

The prosperity of the American farmer is, in fact, unparalleled in any country on earth. In the old and more thickly-settled sections of our land the condition of the homesteads and gardens and fields bears witness to the thrift of the occupants. The improvement in our rural towns which are fortunately situated is almost equal to that of the populous manufacturing cities adjoining. Towns which half a century ago presented a decayed and dingy look, and whose gray repose spoke of sluggishness and discouragement, have risen, with no other industry than agriculture, to the appearance of an industrious and prosperous people. The town-hall tells of civil ambition; the ample school-house tells of faith in education and the ability to obtain it; the imposing meeting-house tells of religious devotion; the well-painted dwelling tells of good taste; and the streets tell of a desire for good order and neighborly courtesy. There is the town library. There is the well-furnished dwelling. There are the cultivated daughters and the intelligent and ambitious sons. There are pictures on the walls, and flowers along the pathway. And this is not an unusual scene. Go then to the newer and more sparsely-settled sections, and the story is similar. The farms are constantly improving. The mortgages with which the occupants began life as settlers are largely lifted.

The early mode of life is changed for the better. One of our most careful observers and statisticians gives a most interesting record composed of replies to inquiries made of the holders of mortgages on Western farms. He says :

"In reply to my questions I have received ten communications, covering a term of years ranging from four to thirty-eight. A summary of the replies, disregarding fractions, is as follows : Number of mortgages, 200,000 ; total amount loaned, \$180,000,000 ; average per mortgage, \$900 ; already paid, 119,000 mortgages ; amount outstanding, \$75,000,000 ; number of mortgages outstanding, 81,000. The total number of foreclosures is not given in all cases ; in some the amount is given, in others the number. The reduction in the rate of interest has been from ten per cent. annual interest and ten per cent. commission on a five years' mortgage to an average of six and a half to seven and a half per cent. at the present time, without commission."

Where is there another agricultural community from which these illustrations could be drawn ? Not, surely, the tenant farmers of England, or the distressed farmers of Ireland, or the peasantry of Central Europe.

That the prosperity of agriculture has kept pace with the increasing prosperity of every other industry in our land is manifest. The activity of the grain-growing sections has been and is great ; and the demand for the product of the pasture and the stall has been most encouraging to those who supply the market at home and abroad. The encouragement, moreover, of local and special crops has been so great that the farmer feels confident of securing a suitable reward for the labor which he applies to the careful and systematic tillage of the soil to supply local markets with what they require, and for the care which he bestows on the orchard and the dairy. The condition of the American farmer is looked upon as so satisfactory that the lesson taught by him is engaging the minds of some of the most thoughtful statesmen and publicists of the old world. The attention of the English farmer, discouraged by the agricultural depression around him, has been called to the contrast between the market gardens of America and the sheep-pastures which surround many of the great cities of his own country. It has been discovered that the American system of landholding is the foundation of great popular content and general prosperity, and accompanied, as it is, by great social and civil opportunities, surrounded, as it is, by the free institutions of our land, attended, as it is, by the school-house and the meeting-house, and by the constant call to public service which occupies so many, it constitutes the foundation

on which rest great mental activity, great dignity of character, great enterprise and ambition. To the practical work of the agricultural community here, wide-spread disaster, moreover, is unknown. The local damage of a drought or a flood is not, indeed, unusual, but the extent of the American territory is such, the diversity of our soil and climate is so great, that the disasters seem to be circumscribed and accidental, while the prosperity is wide-spread and almost constant. With landed possessions, which are obliged to bear the burdens of heavy taxation, with wages of labor vastly greater than in any of the countries of Europe, with the personal requirements of the farmer and his family increased by social obligations and the natural demands of a free and responsible people, we have been able to compete in the grain markets of the world with those who, in some instances, are furnished with land free of rent and taxation, and whose necessities of life are so small and whose duties are so few that the former seem intolerable and the latter seem insignificant and trivial. The skill of the American farmer, supplied as he is with the most ingenious and graceful and effective machinery, has become an object of admiration and imitation. The well-organized home of the American farmer is looked upon as a model. The place filled in the community by the American farmer is considered so important and honorable that other nations inquire how it has been attained. The crops of the American farmer are looked upon as so sure that all anxiety with regard to the supply of food for people less favored has passed away.

The rapid growth of agriculture in America may be made more apparent by recurring to its condition in this country three-quarters of a century ago. At that time the ploughs were usually made by the village blacksmith and wheelwright. Shovel factories were few and small. Grain-harvesters, reapers, mowers, tedders, and horse rakes were unknown. The mechanical enterprise engaged in producing these and other improved implements of husbandry during all these years has been untiring, and the result has been surprising. In one year the patents issued for improvements in agricultural machinery exceeded one thousand, of which thirty-six were for rakes, a hundred and sixty for hay- and grain-harvesters and attachments, a hundred and sixty-seven for seed-planters and drills, thirty for hay- and straw-cutters, ninety for cultivators, seventy-three for bee-hives, ninety for churning, a

hundred and sixty for ploughs and attachments. Meanwhile, the vast increase of production, to which reference has already been made, indicates also the skill and energy of those who are engaged in the various branches of agriculture.

This unusual and extraordinary growth which has thus far attended American agriculture is due not only to the diversity of soil and climate, the rapid increase of population, and the vast improvement in agricultural machinery, but also to the independent ownership of land which characterizes American institutions. It were not easy to tell the strength and stimulus which come through the ownership of the soil to him who occupies it, has fixed his home upon it, and looks to it for his means of subsistence. The proportion of land-holders in the United States to the aggregate population is great, and it is significant when we consider the responsibilities resting upon them and the opportunities they possess. The increase in the number of farms during the twenty years between 1860 and 1880 is remarkable. The aggregate in the entire country in 1860 was 2,044,077 ; in 1880, 4,088,907. The increase by subdivision is largest in the cotton-growing States, where the share-tenant system prevails. In Texas the increase is both by subdivision and new lands, the area in farms having nearly doubled in ten years. In Alabama the increase is about 26 per cent., from 55,128 in 1860 to 135,864 in 1880. The South Atlantic group shows an increase of 72.3 per cent. in farms. In the Western States, also, the increase has been most remarkable. The number of farms in Illinois in 1880 was 255,741, as against 143,-310 in 1860 ; in Indiana the number rose from 131,826 in 1860 to 194,013 in 1880 ; in Kansas it rose from 10,400 in 1860 to 138,561 in 1880 ; in Michigan from 62,000 to 154,000. In the older States also the multiplication was extraordinary. New York increased from 196,990 to 241,058 in the twenty years referred to ; Ohio from 179,889 to 247,189 ; Virginia increased from 92,605 to 118,517. And among the Western States the number of farms in Wisconsin increased from 69,270 to 134,322.

A general survey of the agriculture of this country must impress the observer with the vigor, growth, and magnitude of the industry. That there is a vast investment in agricultural lands is perfectly manifest. That the occupants of the farms are in good condition is evident. That immigration still continues, and large tracts of land are taken up by those who leave the hardship of the

old country for the prosperity of the new, is ample evidence that the promises have all been fulfilled. It is only necessary to contemplate the enormous internal commerce of the country in order to be impressed with the agricultural wealth of the Nation, and it is only necessary to examine the books of the savings-banks in the rural districts in order to be impressed with the financial strength of the farmers. It would seem unnecessary to add that all this work would not be done were it attended by loss, and that it could not be done year after year and generation after generation unless supported by a profit.

GEORGE B. LORING.